

NOVEMBER 30, 1978

Autumn lingers on in the Shortgrass Country. Golden leaves fall along the rivers in indifferent patterns. Grass is barely signed by the light frosts. Warm weekend rains have kept the ground in good condition. It is an unexpected calm in a land that is normally harsh and cold in November.

Out in the pastures, the old cows ignore the pickups. It's the first time in years that the cattle haven't been performing galloping stampedes at the mere rattle of an end gate chain by deer season. For all parties, this is a great relief. I see hombres around the post office so light of heart that their faces look like they are using the same doctor that worked on Betty Ford's face. Every day without a feed bill is a big score in our country.

After going through the hard winter of '77 and '78, we need a long mild fall followed by a weak winter that turns early into a soft, wet spring. By Thanksgiving last year so much feed was hitting the ground that the atmosphere was contaminated by cottonseed meal dust and grain husks. West of San Angelo more woolies were lying on their sides than were standing on four feet. The only reason the whole countryside wasn't abandoned, I think, was due to a shortage of litter bearers and ambulances.

When I realized the seriousness of the season, I put our livestock in small pastures. I wasn't going to have bones scattered all over the ranch. In that other depression in the '30s, I learned to tidy up such signs in case the bank might grow curious where their collateral was going. Though I was a mighty young kid then, I vividly remember the housekeeping it took before the bank's inspector made his visit. Ranches change from a desk side presentation to an on-the-ground report. That's always been true.

I see these younger boys having their bankers out quail hunting and deer chousing quite often nowadays. But I still subscribe to preparing verbal portfolios for my jugkeeper. Newspaper scribes do enough unnecessary blabbing in hard times without bringing your lifeboat out to the scene to have the bottom shot out. I say a happy banker is a banker walking across an irrigated golf course or spinning off to the mountains in a jet. I never lie to mine; nevertheless I think every means should be used to shelter them from reality.

Mornings are cool and brushed of dew. Evenings fade into the purple and pink tinge of kind stillness. I could stand a hundred years of this. Winter has come, but so far we are cheating the wheel.